



The Q & A Way is based in large part on readers' questions. Do you have a question about preparation, strategy or tactics? Submit your questions (with you full name and country of residence please) and perhaps Bruce will reply in his next **Chess Cafe** column...

Yes, I have a question for Bruce!

COLUMNISTS

The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini



The Queen in a Zero-Sum Universe

Question My eight-year-old son has recently taken up chess, and he is enthralled with the idea of promoting pawns to queens. What is the highest number of queens you have ever seen on a chessboard at one time during a game? Thanks! **Rebecca Winter (USA)**

Answer Legally or illegally? Legally, though spuriously, there's the Alekhine five-queen game, where he had three queens and his opponent had two, but most authorities now think that the creative genius of Alekhine made up the entire thing. I've seen four queens (two for each side) logically occur any number of times, as in the game Fischer-Petrosian, from the 1959 Candidates Matches. Ridiculously, I've seen some scholastic players make as many queens as they've had surviving pawns, but for some reason none of those positions made anything like an indelible impression on me. If you can, try to discourage your son from the habit of making more queens than needed, when more than one extra queen is almost never needed. You also might review the attendant ills of this excess. Point out what's become of Alekhine, Petrosian, and to this date, Fischer.

Question I have been reading your column for about 2 months now and I have noticed the majority of the articles tend to be centered around ratings. I wonder if it is the best thing to monitor your progress with just rating. Are there any other factors that you would say make the same or more difference in your feeling of getting better? **Tim Estedahl (USA)**



Answer Yes. Actual strength. If you were really getting stronger as a player, you'd probably feel stronger, and this feeling would almost certainly be based on tangible considerations (assuming you weren't prone to delusions). Either you'd be winning a greater number of your games, or you'd be putting people away faster, or you'd have started to beat players you've had trouble with, or you'd be finding resources to save games you ordinarily wouldn't, or you'd be seeing more deeply into positions, or something palpable you could tell others about. It could be practically anything. Whatever it might be, you'd almost surely sense it, as would others, and it might not necessarily be reflected in ratings, not that maintaining a rating increase would be irrelevant. This would surely mean something, too.

Question I've heard that learning to play blindfold chess is a good way to improve your game. Do you agree? What is the best way to learn how to do this? **Bill Dubinsky (USA)**

Answer Probably something should be cleared up first. When you say blindfold chess, do you mean analyzing positions in your head, or actually playing a game without sight of the board? Regularly analyzing in your head has great value to your overall play. Strong players are almost always good analysts. There's no getting away from it. Whatever type of position you consider, you'll need to appreciate the consequences of your intended actions by being able to see ahead in your mind.

Blindfold chess, where you play an entire game without sight of the board, is not quite the same thing. Surprisingly, the main talent exercised here is not seeing ahead so much as it is remembering what you've already played, which is somewhat antithetical – and frankly, unnecessary -- to what's needed during standard over-the-board chess. Imagine putting all that effort into memorizing, when the chief labor should be concerned with thinking.

If you want to get the most out of an hour's work, you'll gain far more from using the time to analyze positions and tactics without moving the pieces than you would from straining to remember a blindfold game, some of which may consist of mechanically played opening moves, while the rest is likely to be pockmarked with blunders, obvious oversights, and plans based on Alice-in-Wonderland logic. Is this really the stuff you want to commit to memory? Stay with solving tactics in your head, and leave the exhibitionism to those who need to feel they're being looked at and admired.

Question I'm just beginning as a chess player, and I'm wondering if you could recommend any online resources where I could practice (perhaps even play against other beginning players online)? **Kelli Ralph-Campbell (Canada)**

Answer There are many places you can go online to play chess. You can experiment, for example, with the ICC at Chessclub.com, or you can simply go into Yahoo.com and give their service a try. I suspect if you do a search using the word chess you'll come up with something satisfactory.

Question I really appreciate your efforts to help the great unwashed masses. I hit the wall several years ago around 1700 USCF, and I can't seem to progress. I find in looking over my past games and in playing new games that I inevitably drift into passive positions. Training texts provide numerous examples of how to proceed from a strong position, but I seem to be missing something between the opening and the kinds of positions from which middlegame book exercises begin. It happens even against weaker players. I feel as though, in trying to respond reasonably to my opponent's threats, I can never identify active choices. I also feel as though, no matter how aggressive an opening is, I can't develop attacking chances unless the book line comprises an actual attack. Perhaps this is a problem common to many class B players, and I (we) would greatly appreciate any advice that you can offer. **Matthew Parker (USA)**

Answer Your difficulties appear to be twofold. In addition to being a little less than active in response, you may also be having problems with positions in which there's nothing clear and definite to do. These can be among the hardest positions to play, so it's not surprising that you're having trouble with them. Even grandmasters sometimes lose their way in such circumstances, so I wouldn't be put off by the troubles you may be experiencing here. There are no panaceas, no band-aids to affix to your wounds of possible misunderstanding. You simply have to get stronger. You can help yourself out by constantly trying to understand these types of positions whenever you think you're encountering them.

To become more active, some remedies are well known. Regularly play over miniature games, which usually last between 15-25 moves, and also do as many tactical, real-game problems as you can. In this regard, and with respect to either of these two tasks, it's not as necessary to analyze exhaustively, not that we're trying to dissuade you from doing what I practically always seem to recommend. But since you seem to be more concerned with your general lack of

activeness, it makes sense, for now, to focus on what's active and what's not, rather than placing all your emphasis on developing your analytic skills (not that you should neglect these either).

In fact it might help, if you wish to instill greater aggressiveness, to plan weekly marathon sessions, say between 2-4 hours, where you try to play over dozens, if not hundreds, of shorter games at high speed. You can do this better on your computer, but it could also be performed over the board. To make it more interesting, you can do it with a friend, which should slightly decrease the number of mistakes missed and slightly increase the number of useful pointers seen and noted. You can also become more active by playing a lot of speed chess, and also just by trying to think "active." If you stay mindful of a problem, you have a much better chance to tackle it and eventually correct it. Maybe this advice will help you somewhat, though I question its value to the "great unwashed." They have their own ways of thinking, and I'd prefer that they stayed inactive (one can hope), possibly not even going to tournaments at all. The game would surely lose some quality productions, but the whole chess world would smell so much better it would be worth it.

Question I have played chess for a long time. I never seem to get any better. I even seem to be getting worse. Whenever I try my method of playing, which is the Queen's Gambit, I don't do as well as I should. Recently, I've read two of your books, but I don't seem to be getting any better. What should I do? **Jack Klein (USA)**

Answer Stop reading my books. Also, whatever your method of playing has been, start doing the opposite. Maybe you shouldn't rely so much on the Queen's Gambit, either, especially in king-pawn games.

Question I read in the paper this week that Condoleeza Rice's "dream job" would be as NFL Commissioner. *The New York Times* piece said that: "Rice's passion for football stems from her study of the history of warfare. While acknowledging the obvious differences, Rice said she was attracted to two fundamental similarities between football and warfare: the use of strategy and the goal of taking territory... 'I find the strategy and tactics absolutely fascinating. I find the evolution of the game really interesting. Again, as it relates to military history. Military history has swung back and forth between advantage to the offense and advantage to the defense. When the offense has the advantage, then a new technology will come along that will temporarily give the defense the advantage and vice versa. Football

has that kind of pattern, too.’ ...When watching a game, Rice focuses on the offensive line and the secondary the most, two areas where tactics are paramount.” (Sorry for such a long quotation.)

It got me to thinking about similarities between chess and football. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately), I didn’t think about it for long because I know even less about football than I do about chess. But I do know that some have theorized that chess began as an education of sorts about warfare. Chess writing is the only place outside of military writings that I have seen the distinction made between tactics and strategy. Does football analysis generally make such a distinction? What similarities do you see in the games or in the analysis thereof? Could someone actually learn about chess principles by watching (and understanding) football (my son’s fingers are crossed here) or vice versa?

Finally, to be more seasonal, how do you think it compares to baseball (chess not football – I can always refer to George Carlin’s classic comedy routine for that) – or does it? Just yesterday I heard a baseball commentator make a reference to “checkmate” in the last innings of a heartbreaking game. And I vaguely remember Tim McCarver quoting something General Rommel (desert fox) said about chess in relation to a baseball game last year. **Iris Henderson (USA)**

Answer Actually, I can understand your interest in big-time sports and military operations, strategically and tactically, though I’m a little perplexed about your insertion of chess. What does that game have to do with this column? Perhaps you meant to send your chess question to Tim McCarver, Condoleeza Rice, or even General Rommel, but somehow got the wrong e-mail addresses. I’d try to help you anyway, but the Yankee game is about to start, Clemons is on the mound, and I don’t want to miss a single pitch.

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